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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: PREPARING FOR MERCY DEPLOYMENT IN LANAO DEL NORTE

REF: A. MANILA 885 (Laying Groundwork for MERCY Deployment)

[1](#)B. MANILA 893 (Balikatan Exercises)

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: During an April 28 visit to Iligan City and Lanao del Norte province in the southern Philippines, Embassy officers and a U.S. Navy planner consulted with senior Philippine civil and military officials regarding the upcoming visit of USNS MERCY. Polcouns highlighted the importance of the MERCY visit to the U.S.-Philippine partnership and the hospital ship's goal of helping bring peace and prosperity to this conflict-affected area. Local officials were grateful for the planned MERCY visit and the opportunity to share their thoughts on the proposed medical missions. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) As part of a continuing outreach effort by Mission personnel to lay the groundwork for a smooth USNS MERCY visit in Mindanao (reftel A), Polcouns, Defense Attache and MERCY planner met April 28 with Lanao del Norte Governor Muhammad Khalid Dimaporo, Iligan City Mayor Lawrence Cruz and Police Director Virgilio Ranes, and local Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) commander Col. Antonio Supnet.

[1](#)3. (U) Polcouns thanked the officials and AFP for their efforts to make the MERCY visit a success. He emphasized that the MERCY's May 29-June 14 visit reflected the friendship between our countries and the importance of partnerships with Philippine national and local government officials, NGOs, and community organizations. He stressed the humanitarian nature of the mission and its goal of providing medical care to thousands of Filipinos. He also expressed the hope that the MERCY visit would play a positive role in bringing peace and prosperity to Mindanao.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Lanao del Norte Governor Dimaporo voiced strong enthusiasm for the MERCY visit and asked that a medical team be sent to his provincial capital, Tubod, not just Iligan city proper. The governor expressed confidence that Lanao del Norte residents were likewise enthusiastic about the visit and said he did not expect the kind of anti-U.S. demonstrations that marked the arrival of humanitarian teams in neighboring Lanao del Sur during the recent Balikatan exercises (reftel B). The governor pointed out that Iligan City is an independent, chartered city that functions very separately from the rest of Lanao del Norte, and he wanted to ensure that a wide spectrum of constituents benefited directly from the MERCY's visit. The governor promised to provide crowd control and security for a medical team and use of the Mindanao Civic Center if medical mission took place there.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Dimaporo, the country's youngest governor, described the close ties between President Gloria Arroyo and his prominent political family (his father is a sitting Congressman, and both his father and mother served as governor). He outlined the political dispute between his province and Iligan City over congressional boundaries and representation, saying that his mother lost a bitter campaign for a congressional seat because of Iligan City's encroachment. Dimaporo lamented his province's relative poverty,

saying he planned to focus on increasing tourism and on improving education so more residents could go overseas to earn foreign currency.

¶16. (SBU) Iligan City Mayor Cruz also welcomed the MERCY's visit, both for the immediate benefits to his city's neediest residents and for the symbolic message that the city is safe for investment and development. Mayor Cruz stressed that Iligan is a safe city - noting that 16 of 22 provincial mayors in the area have their homes in Iligan and commute to work in their constituencies every day - but the city's hospital is overcrowded, and the area's image as a conflict zone makes it more difficult to attract outside investment.

The Mayor expressed the strong belief that the MERCY's visit would help ameliorate the hospital's problems in the short term and improve the city's image with outside investors in the long run.

¶17. (SBU) Iligan City Police Director Ranes, and Colonel Antonio Supnet, commander of the Philippine Army's local Task Force Tabak, concurred that there was widespread support for the MERCY's mission.

They reinforced the view that the general peace and stability situation in Lanao del Norte was good, and that the medical teams from MERCY would be welcomed. Like Mayor Cruz, both said that they have been talking to local village officials to inform them of the MERCY's purpose and capabilities.

¶18. (SBU) On a broader note, Col. Supnet said his task force, recently relocated from the island of Jolo where it played a more direct combat role in the Philippines' counterterrorism efforts, had to make adjustments in Lanao del Norte. Some of his men were former Muslim insurgents from Jolo who had integrated into the AFP, and were now separated from their families still on the island. His

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troops also had to adjust their attitude in dealing with armed insurgents. On Jolo, the governor had banned the carrying of weapons in public, making it easier for the AFP to patrol. In Lanao del Norte, however, insurgents traveled across the province with weapons in plain view, posing a more visible challenge to AFP authority, though in fact direct conflict seemed less likely in Lanao del Norte.

¶19. (SBU) Comment: Iligan and Lanao del Norte present striking political, economic, and social contrasts. Iligan is an industrialized, overwhelmingly Christian enclave bordering rural, predominantly Muslim Lanao del Norte. Still, discussions in both places indicate very strong support for the MERCY's proposed missions. MERCY planners are examining the feasibility of Governor Dimaporo's request for a medical team to visit his provincial capital, in addition to stopping in Iligan city. End Comment.